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THE TOWNSHIP LINE

Albert Frederick Wilson

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THE TOWNSHIP LINE

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New England Narratives

By

ALBERT FREDERICK WILSON

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To R. D. W.

Men cannot sing my tunes
Because, they say,
I have no tunes to sing—

Not if counting off
The run of fives and eights
Is any test.

They do not know
The kind of song
I try to bring to you.

Yet if they had
My tuning-fork,
And knew the trick—
Just where to strike the tines—
Just how to catch the key—

They'd find my tune
In every little portion
Of this book.

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THE TOWNSHIP LINE

BARN FIRE!

Barns burn up on windy nights.
Some one forgets the lantern
In the stall, or the draught
Catches the sparks from a pipe.
We put our corncobs aside
When we go to water—
Just inside the door on
The joisting—brush aside the
Hay dust with our thumbs
And keep that place for the pipe;
But we stick it back
Between our teeth before
We slide the door again.
We do not see the sparks that fly.
We close the door and latch it tight—
The fire has a good start.

Then the warm glow
On the sky-line;
The drowsy farm lands stir,
Sit bolt upright with
The fire fear in their eyes.
Roosters crow, tumbling from
Their roosts to announce the false dawn.
Then comes the sound of men's feet
Hurrying down the country road;
Lumbering, heavy-footed farm horses,
With blankets roped about their backs

And the wind through their manes,
Are silhouetted along the stone wall,
Animated wooden hobby-horses.

We run to the doors to sweep our eyes
Around the circle to find
The red-hot spot
With the sparks shooting
Into the night,
And we say,
"That must be Williams's house,
Or Craig's barn, or the school-house,
Or the wagon-shop—"
But our guess of a mile
Is always three.
Up and down across the hills
We guess as we go,
A hay-barn by the way
The sparks fly,
And haying-time just over,
And hay selling for
Thirty dollars a ton.

It is strange how an old barn
That no one pays any attention to
For fifty years, except to patch
The roof and stuff hay into it—
A dead shell with a cow-stall or two,
And a bed for the old horses—
Can scorch itself into the night,

So that every living thing
Stirs and wakes and turns
Its wide eyes.

A flaming black hulk
There on its little hill,
With the red life through its roof
And its doors and its windows:
Crushing, expanding, tearing—
Whirling the dead hulk into
A chaos of energy; conscious
Of its mighty moment—
Radiant from a coal lit by
The first torch.

The little gray barn
That nobody noticed
Making men run
And curse
And pray
And wonder
About the hand
Of the Lord God.

"Who said His name?"
Stammered a little bowlegged man
In a white cotton shirt
At my elbow.
"There ain't any—
There ain't any God,"

He spat, his throat dry
With the blasphemy.
I knew him—
Jared Turnbull.
He owned the barn.
He'd lost his wife from the typhoid
In the well the year before,
And now he stood there with
The rest of us—looking on.

When he had gone,
Muttering the damned words
Over and over to keep the taste
Of something sweet from slipping
From his tongue, the old woman
In the horse-blanket leaned
To my shoulder.
"He's beside himself,"
She said. "It 'll be more than
A year before he understands."
And then from her cupped hands:
"Some folks say he won't never.
Maybe he's committed the Unforgivable."

Relayed from the creaking well-chains
Came the cry, "The well's gone dry."

The white horse tied to the cherry-tree
Neighed through an old throat—

Much too old, querulous, despondent
Of men and things.

Such voices ought to be silenced—
They commit a mischief.

Then the roof fell in.
The unseen hand of gravity
Reached up, releasing what was left
Of the red flame in the rotten timbers.
And at that last power men stood dumb
With the old futile awe upon their faces.

So the consuming flame
Brought out those country faces,
Set them like a magic-lantern show
Against the black curtain of the night—
Man and woman of New England.

The hollow cheeks—
Toothless or with projecting rims
Of cheap dental parlors—
Eyes blanked by the township line—
Shoulders pulled by a one-horse plow.

The tag end of the tag end
Of the strong that went
East and west when the patient,
Long-suffering New England hills
Began to spume poverty.

And I thought of my old portraits
Of Connecticut men and women,
Those who first fenced these meadows
And reared the timbers of that barn
And built the Baptist church. . . .

On the way home
The county attorney
Asked for a lift.
"Not a cent of insurance—
A shiftless lot";
He condemned with the
Straight arrow of Youth.

"They work so hard," I said.
"Night and morning they are at it,
Faithful to the last strength."

He said, "Their fields are old women.
No man can breed with them."

I said, "We are no better,
We do not speak out—
We do not tell the truth
About New England;
We love it beyond stark eyes."

But he went back to the circle:
"A shiftless lot—
But I like them for jurymen—

Always choose them when
The case is one of j-u-s-t-i-c-e!
They'll give a man his due—
Lean over backwards to do it—
They can get their teeth
Into a man's rights.

"Just a plain statement of the facts—
No oratory of New York lawyers
Can fool them when somebody
Is trying to take something
Away from somebody that
He ought not to have."

I'm glad that I picked up
The attorney on the way home
From Turnbull's fire.

THE BAPTIST CHURCH

They are making the old Baptist church
Into a moving-picture show.
A man by the name of Levy bought it.
It wasn't much of a church
With its low-ceiling room
And its tiny white steeple
Sticking up from a little green hill.

Connecticut is full of them
Or used to be, when the
Crossroads stopped men's footsteps
Before the sign-posts pointed
To ten thousand miles.

My great-grandfather helped
To build that church.
It has stood by the country road
A hundred years or more.
He climbed the steeple box
When it was done
And stood there on his head.

Every neighbor did his part
With the tools at his hands:
Oak timber from Peck's wood;
Nathan Post with his three sons—
Boss carpenters every one;
Noah Hepburn, teacher and surveyor;

Noag Reynolds, stone-mason;
Philip Winslow, with the best
Four-horse team in town.

And the women made the rag-carpet
Down the aisle; and the linen cloth
For the communion service;
And they swept on Fridays—
Washed the windows of God's house—
Kept them clean, women's hands—
Eager to the Lord God
From the churn and the brick oven
And the constant doing of things
For little children.

The little old Baptist church:
They are making it over
Into a moving-picture show.
The little old worn-out room
With its straight-back pews:
From the days when men leaned
Forward to the voice of God.

Those men—
And their sons?
They are everywhere to-day,
Even here, in Connecticut.
They have come back
To the old places; some of them

Bought up the barren meadows
And the pasture lands;
Some have Italian Gardens
In New England.

And one man brings the robe,
And one man runs the bath,
And one man lays the clothes,
And one man brings the mail,
In New England.

"Drive only the roads
That are smooth and even;
There are extra cylinders
For extra hills"—
Oh, the lungs of iron
And the hearts of steel
In New England.

And the little old Baptist church—
All day long I have been watching
The old negro—splitting up
The pulpit into kindling wood—

And I think
Of the growing lands
Keeping men to growing things;
Clod, rock and manure

Broken by men's hands
Into New England.

Oh, I don't so much blame Levy.
He goes to his own church
Every Saturday morning.

THE SOUTH PASTURE LOT

John Todd has sold
The old South Pasture Lot.
The worn-out apple-trees
Go with it, and the raspberry-patch.
John held on to it
As long as he could—
Kept making excuses to save it.
But it wasn't worth anything—
No more than he was.
But it was all he had—
All there was left
Of the Todd grant
Running back five miles
From Long Island Sound—
All except the house and dooryard.

He came over to sit on my door-step:
What would I do?
"A man couldn't live
With just a dooryard—
But then the pasture lot
Didn't make a farm.
And the money would patch
Up the house and keep those
Mortgage-lenders about their business."

It wasn't as though he
Could grow anything on the lot.

"It won't have to work any more—
That's one thing; Brewster 'll let
It guzzle in rich manure—
Stuff it up like a fat goose—
Better off than me in that respect.

"But then that's just
What I object to—
Treating his pastures like himself.
You know what he's up to—
Bound to have five hundred acres—
And everything he touches
Stops working.

"You take that stone wall.
My grandfather built it
With his own hands—
Picked the stone from the field
Thirty days to the acre—
And carted them there.
He made the wall
And the wall made—
Well, one of his sons
Was a college professor.

"That old wall's got the makings
Of a lot more good men
If they'd only leave it alone.
It 'll make these I-talians, maybe—
I know what you're thinking—

'Didn't make me,' you're saying—
I can tell by the way your lips move.
But what kind of an argument is that?

"My grandfather wouldn't like
To see it go to a man like Brewster.
He didn't get along none too well
With Brewster's old man when he
Was as poor as Job's turkey
And carrying swill for us.

"That's the trouble with Brewster.
He won't let the wall stay natural
Like a man's beard, with the gravy
And the tobacco falling—just so—
He'll have a stone-mason over here
Within the week—you know that.
Stone walls ain't the same when
You trim them up and plaster them.
The Lord knocks down walls
For you and me to pick up again.
There ain't a wall between here
And Berswick you can work on.

"These city New-Englanders
With their ancestor worship—
Plain idolatry, I call it—
Come back and buy up my pasture lot
And yours; strip off their overalls
And dress them up for Sunday-school

With perfumery on their handkerchiefs.
What I want to know is
How about my ancestors?

"It 'll grow to look like him
Instead of me—you know that.
Fields have a way of doing that.
And it's what I can't stand—
Having it right there
Next to my windows—
When things stop working
They don't look like New England.

"I guess our stock's run out—
Something Scriptural about it, maybe.
But Brewster—he's offering
Ten times what it's worth.
And I can't sleep nights,
And a pasture lot don't make a farm,
And—

"How much did Phil Ward
Say he paid for that little
Second-hand automobile?"

THREE MEN SPEAK

The first said:
"There is something that goes
With being young.
I do not know,
I cannot understand it,
Nor you, for that matter.
But it's the explanation
If you can explain such things
With plus and minus signs, just so!

"Here's a fellow says
He carries me upon his back,
Because I work my head
And he works his hands.
I use his back
And he uses my eyes—
That's fair enough for anybody.
But he won't have it that way.
He won't call that Brotherhood.
He doesn't like what my eyes see.
And he says he's tired
Toting me around.

"I say that he must be very old
Whining around like that
About his share of the work.
I didn't make him blind,
Nor me halt, for that matter.

I don't know how we're ever
Going to get along without
His back and my eyes.

"I don't call his back
Very easy riding, either,
When it comes to that.

"The trouble is
There's too much comes upon a man
All at once, when he is growing old—
Makes him sour about his rights.
That's where all this talk comes from.
You'd think a man would know
Something about Brotherhood by the time
He was seventy, more or less!

"But it doesn't work that way.
Maybe it's because
There isn't any such thing.
Maybe it's just another
One of those things
Being young does to you,
With a ribbon and a fiddle.

"What's the use of pretending?
We old fellows know how to skin a skunk,
And make the best of it, too,
If we aren't too old."

The second said:
"It isn't being young
That has anything to do with it.
It's just another way to get a dollar.
They tried it out single
And now they're trying it double,
Running it down with the pack
And calling it Brotherhood.

"Sometimes I think it's like
A shell game at the fair—
Promising something you don't see
For something you think you see.
You might better have spent it
For pink lemonade, or saved it
For a gas-engine for the old woman.

"You've put it in your copy-book
A hundred times or more—
And so have I—
'You can't make something
Out of nothing!'
But what's the use
Of quoting the schoolmaster?
What's he know about things?
Sitting there at his desk
With a twelve-inch rule!
You can see the pea
With your own eyes—
And things have changed, anyway.

"That fellow with the walnut shell—
He's my idea of Brotherhood!"

And the third said:
"I know what it is,
But I won't tell
Because you aren't up to it."

So the first
Looked across at him and said:
"You're too young to know."

And the second said:
"You're much too old."

But he said:
"I am neither.
I'm you!"

A QUIET little man,
A member of the Academy
They said, with pictures
In the museum at Boston.

I remember how he looked
Standing there in the hall
Over Cort's hardware-store—
His thin, quick-scenting nostrils—
The deep black eyes that kept
Looking through things
And under things
And in between things
For something he called:
"The human equation."

I was younger then.
If a man were sick
I thought he could be cured
By a doctor with a
Little, simple pill
That could be taken
With a glass of water.

So much of this
And so much of that
And a drop from the bottle
On the high shelf.

This for the liver
And this for the bladder
And this for the good of the stomach.

(So I have stood
In the flickering light
Of the cart-tail medicine man
With the walnut stain on his face,
And the red feather in his black wig,
And the tobacco drip
Washing the paste diamond
On his white shirt-front—
So I have stood
Watching him with his broken crucible
Mixing, while I waited,
The "Bitters" for my malady.

A leaf from the dried dandelion,
A root from the snake-vine,
A berry from a secret place.)

I was younger then,
And so was he,
The man with the pictures
In the museum at Boston.
He did not have a feather
In his hair, nor walnut stain
Upon his face,
Nor a berry from a secret place,
Although he had brought

A crucible of his own
And he was mixing "Bitters"
For a great Plague.

He was no faker
With a nigger playing the banjo
And a bass-drum with his toes.
He had smeared the red corpuscles
Upon a glass slide,
And screwed his microscope
Close to the swarming mess
And there he had found
The suspected infection—
A myriad host—
Cog, Bolt, and Lever,
Nut, Spring, and Valve,
Screw, Chain, and Bearing—
Fastening their myriad tentacles
To the red cheeks of a man's soul.

Then he told us
About a man
He had seen
In a fertile valley
Beside the Mediterranean
Who was sitting
Beneath the shade
Of an olive-tree
Making a plow
From a crooked stick.

Himself, his wages,
And his hours,
His four walls
The hills of morning.
His time-clock
The silent day
Sifting through his fingers.

Making all the plow,
And while making it
In his eyes
The turn of the red earth
And between his bare toes
The feel of the cool clod—
The smell of the rain
In the wind.

So Art into labor,
And labor into contentment,
And contentment into happiness,
And happiness into the making
Of a man's soul.
"A man's soul!"
How the quiet little man shuddered!

It reminded him
Of a factory he had seen—
A monstrous thing of brick and steel
Covering ten city blocks—
A whirling, shrieking, stinking madness.

And the green, yellow smoke
From the chimneys, shutting out
The sun from the row of plain
Little houses down the street;
With their stoops all alike,
And their front windows all alike,
And their back yards all alike,
And their wash-pulley poles all alike.

Five thousand men
Standing in the green and yellow murk,
Bound wrist and ankle to a machine,
Putty-faced men waiting listlessly
For the shrill knife of the whistle
To cut them free.

Five thousand men—
Putty-faced men—
Doing a mean little part
Of a mean little job
In a mean little sort of a way,
According to a formula
Worked out by a college professor.

They were making
The great American steam-plow!

To-day,
There in the North River,
Five silent ships

Slipped down with
The run of the tide.
No flags were flying.
No whistles were blowing.
No bells were ringing.

So I said
To the man who knew:
"Where are they going?
And what do they carry?
And why do they hurry so?"

I found
That they were
Taking wheat—
Ten thousand times
Ten thousand famine bushels
To the man
Who had been sitting
Beneath the shade
Of the olive-tree,
Making a plow
From a crooked stick.

STREET LAMPS

On city streets
When night comes,
You can hear the purr
Of the many wings
Toward the many lights.

It is an old conceit
Of the candle,
That men come to it
Leg weary with the sun.

So with street lamps.

I heard his voice
Through the warm spring night
Before I saw his face,
And the little crowd about him
On the street corner.

He was a singed little man
Selling pamphlets for ten cents
Which taught you how to make
A President of your child.

"Breed your young
As you breed your cattle.
For ten cents, this book

Will tell you how to rear
Your children with characters
Like Abraham Lincoln's—
The science of Eugenics—
Make children like you make prize hogs—
For ten cents—"

I bought a copy of his book,
But before I could put it
In my pocket, a hand tip-tapped
Upon my shoulder.

"Do you believe
What he says, neighbor?"
He was a plain fellow
With a stoop to his shoulders
And New England across his forehead,
And around his eyes and mouth—
If he had been older,
I should have called him
"Mr. Emerson."

I said:
"I should like to have
Blue-ribbon children."

We sat down on the park bench.
He said:
"I would not buy his book
Because it is blasphemous.

We cannot regulate such things—
We do not know where we are bound—
How can we draw a chart?"

"But the prize hogs?" I said.
"We know that much.
We can figure on the pork and bacon—
So much for so much."

But he shook his head.
"I am a New-Englander. He said:
For seven generations my people
Run back to the days of the colonies
And the royal grants
And the Puritan strain.
They have been schoolmasters,
Traders with the West Indies—
One preacher there was,
And a blacksmith,
And several farmers.

"But preacher and teacher and 'smith
They kept close to the land—
They stood ankle deep in it—
For two hundred years—
For two hundred years—
So that their toes
Were always tangled
In the roots of the grass.

"They were men
With a heft to their heads—
Stone-wall men—
Of that day and generation.

"I do not know
What it is
That makes a stone-wall man,
But it has something to do
With picking up stones in a field
And building them into a wall
So that things may grow
Where the Lord put the stone,
And so that things may stay
Where man put the wall.

"We have the old house still
With a bit of the land
Up in Connecticut.
But that's about all
There is to it.

"I've been a ribbon clerk
For fifteen years.

"You see, there is where
I have a quarrel with that fellow.
It takes seven generations—and more
Of stone-wall men
To make a ribbon clerk.

"Is that what New England
Has been about?
Jonathan Edwards, Wendell Phillips,
Thoreau, Ephraim Williams, Mr. Whittier?
A ribbon clerk?

"I thought I knew New England
When I saw it.
Jane Addams, and Ida Tarbell,
And Lincoln Steffens, and
Roosevelt, though he was Dutch,
And Wilson, born in Virginia,
And this fellow Brandeis—
They say he's a Jew—
They're all New England.

"I've been trying
To figure it for fifteen years,
Off and on, whenever I could
Be alone, I'd be asking myself,
'What's it all about?'

"I'm just as much New England
As they are, and more, for that matter.
It's here in my bones,
And deeper than that, sometimes.

"I'm part of them,
Bone and flesh.
I read about them

In the papers and magazines,
And up there in my room,
I can hear them
Talking back and forth—
New England talk!

"But they won't listen
When I join in.
I can see they think
I am a stranger.

"They don't seem to recognize
That my kind of talk
Is New England, too.

"Just like what I read
A fellow wrote the other day
In a weekly paper.
He said the world was through
With New England—the one
You and I are talking about.

"He said Puritan traditions
Were worn-out crutches,
And we couldn't expect
To bolster up a limping world
With them any more.

"I don't know
What he's talking about

But I guess he does.
Because folks wrote
Letters to the paper
And told him he was right.

"Sometimes I think
Maybe they meant me.

"That's why I say,
There's nothing to
That fellow's talk.

"His book won't tell you
That it takes a preacher,
Three schoolmasters, and a 'smith
To make a ribbon clerk."

SOWING THE WINTER RYE

Dwight cleaned the scruff
From the wood-hill lot
And said: "Now it's got to work
The same as the rest of us.
A hill that's only good for scenery
Isn't good for much.
Unless maybe it might
Make a sizable burying-lot—

"But we don't do that any more.
When you have it that near
It's always reminding.
I wouldn't care so much
The rest of the year,
But there's something about
November reminding I don't like.
With fields as spare as mine
It isn't natural for a man
To have it that way.

"So I said: 'There's no good
Saving it for a burying-lot.
I'll brush her off of scrub
And put her down in winter rye—
Maybe there's something in this talk
About taking manure from the air—
Like that fellow said.
I don't know where else we can get it.'"

And so, to-day,
Dwight's been at it.
I've been watching him
From my window, following him
Now and then through the cold
November afternoon—at his sowing
From the tin pail
In the crook of his arm.

Striding and swinging,
Striding and swinging,

Dip and scatter,
Dip and scatter,

Up and over,
Up and over

The rim of the hill.

I thought,
Here's something for the philosophers—
That the time of harvest
Should come to be
The time of sowing.

When it was time for Dwight to quit
I went across my lot to his,
And up the hill, keeping to the edge
Of the plowed field.

I wanted to hear what he'd have
To say about the philosophers
If I should ask him.

He did not see me
There by the edge of the wood,
So that I could stand and watch him
Swing and scatter! Swing and scatter!
Coming toward me.

And as he walked
I saw him slow and falter,
And then he stopped
Ankle deep—there in the heavy earth,
With the pail in the crook
Of his arm, and his head down
As though he had been caught in a spell
Of dizziness, or had pulled
His shoulder with the swing.

"I saw you stop," I said.
"And I wondered if the old
Trouble had come back."

But he shook his head and laughed,
And put down his pail and sat down
There beside me on the sycamore log.

"Time to quit an hour ago,"
He said. "But I got to laughing

About what a stranger came up here
To say to me along about noon.
I got to puzzling over what
He had to say, and let the time
Slip by—I don't know when I've
Laughed so much, or laughed so hard.
And I can't tell just what it is
I'm laughing at—can't think it
Out in words, and so I have to stop
And laugh; that's what I was doing
When you saw me."

I said, "Who was he, a peddler?"

Dwight said:
"He didn't just call himself that—
The fact is, I don't know
What he *was* trying to be.

"He said he was trying
To sell me to myself!
Maybe you can make something
Out of that—I can't.

"He said he could explain—
He was a sort of politician—
A new sort—because he didn't
Give me one of the cigars he was smoking.

"I can't tell you all he said.
He was what we call an easy talker,

And he said he wanted to be able
To call me 'Comrade'!

"First I thought he meant religion.
Perhaps he was a Methodist—
But he looked from foreign parts—
One of these fellows that work in factories.

"I let him have his say.
There's something you have to listen to
When a man thinks you've been abused.

"'How long you been working to-day?' he asks.
I said: 'Since sun-up.'

"'And when do you quit?' he asks.
'Sun-down,' I said.

"'And what 'll you get for it?' he asks.
'I'm after manure in the air,' I said.

"'And what 'll you get for that?' he asks.
'Maybe a stand of corn next year,' I said.

"'What 'll that be worth?' he asked.
'Whatever God Almighty
Puts into the rain,' I said.

"He laughed!
'Who's this fellow God Almighty?' he asks.
'Don't you have religion?' I said.

"'What's religion ever done for you?' he asks.
'It might have done more
If I'd done more,' I said.

("I'm not religious except when I hear
It getting attacked by a fellow with
A black cigar in the corner of his mouth.)

"He said:
'God Almighty's for the rich.
The working-man must make himself a God,
With no Priest and no Church and no Giving.

"'Don't you know,' he said,
'Don't you know there ain't no God?'

"He said:
'It's just a Santa Claus story
Like you used to tell your kid.
The rich man made it for the poor man,
And they keep a few old women like
These priests, around the chimney corner,
To tell us children to be good,
And say our prayers, and do our duty,
And fetch and carry for our elders,
Or Santa Claus won't stop in the morning.'

"I said:
'He didn't stop here, one year!

The summer I was drunk
And didn't get the hay in.'

"That made him mad,
And he got up and brushed himself—
Mighty particular he was to brush himself—
And he went off over the wall,
Saying something in his language.
If it had been in English, I should say
He was calling me a damned fool.

"That's what I've been laughing at.
What did he mean—
Selling me to myself?"

THE letter lies on my table
Just as I left it a day or so ago,
Half torn through as I opened it.
You can see the ink mark of my thumb
Over the publisher's name at the top,
And the few lines of blue type
With the smudged erasures
And the well-known name signed
"Hastily yours":

It reads:
"We should like a short anthology
Of verse—little poems of comfort
From our poets of to-day—
For the countless thousands
Who shall mourn.
Will you gather them together
And write an introduction?
We shall call the volume,
'Comfort Ye, My People!'"

Here is the introduction.

Dear Reader:
Three men came down my road
Talking of things that men talk of
When the furrow is run—
Of the hogs gone with the cholera—

Of the corn rotted in the ground—
Of France!
And one said:
"Why should I plow?"
And one said:
"Why should I plant?"
And one said:
"I think it is the last day."
But I called to them:
"You may plow!
You may plant!
It is not the last day!
I have the Great Assurance!"

Dear reader, I find it here
In this anthology.
These poems which I have culled
Are carefully selected from your friends,
The living poets—
Little words of faith and hope
To comfort and sustain you.

Men used to say
That poets were a part of God's Voice:
I cannot tell;
I only know it takes a long time
To make a poet.
Men made David a king
But God made him a poet

Because He knew men should need him
When the Jews were through with him.

No one knows how God makes poets.
He has told many things, but this
He has never divulged.

I could not make a poet,
But I could whisper something to Him
Which I think He ought to know,
When He is making poets these days.
He ought to sit cross-legged
Like a tailor
Sewing up their pockets
Before ever they are born,
So that they cannot be business men
Or make automobiles
Because so many poets
Crawl into their pockets,
And no matter where we search
We cannot find them.

But I hope that you
Will turn the pages of this little book
Each for your need and particular fancy.
That you may be comforted—
Your eyes may be better than mine.

You shall find one
Making verses to his mistress.

And man standing at his machine,
Certain but uncertain
After the thousand years
As to which shall be animate!

And one is ravished
By a Japanese fan.

And democracy has sent itself to war
Butcher and Baker and Candlestick-maker
Burning with the white flame!

And one is making rimes to Peace.

A poet afraid of Death!

And one is fiddling jig tunes
On the heartstrings of God Almighty.

And ten million men with wide eyes
Over No-man's Land
Trying to see—God!

And one is whimpering
That Christ is dead—
Slain by the hand of a Hun.

And Jimmie Handy,
Who used tc repair motorcycles
And go with Susie Turner

Every Saturday night—
They nailed him up
With the cud of tobacco
Still in his cheek,
The Crucifixion brought
To a barn door—
Jimmie Handy—
So that men might have
The Everlasting Life!

Sometimes I think
The Lord is through with poets.
Or perhaps He has changed the pattern;
It may be He has taken to making
Them into college professors.
Perhaps it's Mr. Wilson!
But you know how people
Would laugh at that.
A poet couldn't be some one
You voted for in a barber shop!

So, dear reader,
This is how I know
It is not the last day.

The last day will have a poet.
That is where the trumpet will come in!

SIGNS

I THOUGHT I'd put the sign up, anyway.
Some of those artists who are coming up
Through here might take a notion to the place.

I'd sort of like to see an artist get it;
They put such pretty things at the windows.

Jule sold her farm last week—just this way—
Put a notice on the gate-post.
Funny, isn't it; how land that can't raise
Anything else, they'll pay real high for?

But then Ed says
City folk don't like a house like this—
Right on the road where every one can see
What they're about; they want it back a space.

There's such a thing as having
Too much of folks, I guess.
We used to say their welcome wears out.
That's why a roadside site detracts from value.

I don't just fancy having a sign
Clutter up the yard this way;
But you know how it is with me.
There's no need of my hanging on—
Wearing myself out keeping it up
And then leaving it to charity.

It isn't as though
I was ever going to have children.
And Ed don't take to farming like he
Used to before he got to house-painting.
He's ailing most the time, now.
Sometimes I think he's just petering out
Right here before my very eyes.

If there was anything
Coming on after us it would be different.
But the doctor told me last year.
It can't ever be!

Oh, I know when I done it
The minute Doctor Cobb says it;
I could remember the very day—
How the pain came down through me
Here in my back and in my leg.

I told the doctor
Just how it happened.
I said to Ma:
"Ma, something's happened—
I ain't feeling just right."
But you know how she was:
Never paying attention
To anything except herself.

"I ain't feeling just right,"
I says, trying to straighten up

By holding on the kitchen door.
But there she sat, and she says,
"You got to get it through, Allie,
You got to get it through,
So's I can see.
Seems so I'd just have to
See through that door."

I let it stay there,
Just where I got stuck,
Waiting for Ed to come home.

I says:
"Ma, I'm through!"

Think of me saying that
Ten years ago!

You know how it was
When Ed brought me here.
Folks told me there was erysipelas
In their family.
They said they'd all lay down on me.
Your mother used those very words.
Ed always held it against her.

I can see it now.
There his mother was
Bringing up a family for twenty-five years,
And the day I walked into the house
In my bridal dress, she sits down

In that rocking-chair and says
She can't walk, something is the matter
With her legs, and she can't walk,
Can't take another step, not a step.

And so I took off my dress
And got supper;
And Ed went to the milking,
And we toted her bed down-stairs,
And set it up in the side room,
And we dragged her to it,
And back again the next morning,
And all that week,
And all the next week,
And all the next year,
And for ten years after that.

Not a step did she take,
Just sitting there finding fault,
Criticizing me and everything I did,
And everything I said—
Until I pretty near went mad.

Then one day
She says she can't stand
The sitting-room no longer.

Because it hurt her eyes
Looking at the same thing
All the time.

She wants I should move the stove
Into the parlor so she can sit in there
Where her eyes won't hurt.

And she kept at me,
And she kept at me,
Until I couldn't stand it no longer.

So, one day, I says,
"I guess I've got to do it
To get some peace around here."
So I up and took the pipe down
With my own hands—a dirty job, too.
Ed never looked after things
Like he ought, even then.
And I began to drag
And to haul at that stove
Until I had it almost half-way
Through the door—

Then it was
That something give way.
I forget what the doctor called it.
But it give way.
He found it soon enough
When he begun to poke around on me.

And there I was
Stuck with the stove

Half-way through the door.
And her sitting there
Rocking and sniveling
And sniveling and rocking,
And she keeps saying,
"Allie, I got to see through;
Seems so I just got to see through."

But I didn't touch a hand to it.

When Ed comes home he says,
"You oughtn't to have done it,
Allie; you oughtn't to have done it."

And then him and Joe
Moved the stove through.

I thought I'd put the sign up, anyway.

Upon my reading-table
Lies a copy of the country paper.
Looking down the column of the page,
I learn the topic of the Woman's Club
This week will be,
"The Unmarried Woman—
Her Right to a Child."

At my window the summer night
Comes down upon the elm-trees.
And I can see the silhouette
Of Mary Hedghes passing along
The country road on her way
To prayer-meeting at the
Congregational church.

Tall and stiff and straight
She goes, a monotone in black—
The little plain hat,
The umbrella under her arm—
(Rain or shine)
The Bible in her folded hands—
The tight pull to her yellow-gray hair—
The stern set of her face—
The steady, measured,
Clock-like stride.

Those who come in motor-cars
Point to Mary Hedghes, smile,
And turn to look again,
Chatting idly of New England types,
And of the harsh severities
Of the Puritan remnant.
Chatting idly—
They of the softer breed—
Crossed with lace and silk stockings,
And the brocade motor—
Three generations removed
From the churning hand,
The spring-house, and contented hens
Soft pecking on warm manure piles.

And Mary Hedghes
On her way to prayer-meeting
At the Congregational church
This night for forty years.

I do not know why
I should stand and follow her,
Or why this strange refrain
Should echo through my ears
Keeping broken measure to her tread.

One foot!
One foot!
One foot following the other!

One foot!
One foot!
One foot following the other!

Steady treading!
Steady treading!

So!
And so!
And just so!

Thus it was
She found Anne Williams
That night knee-deep in Bogwater,
When no one else knew.

One foot!
One foot!
One foot following the other!

And there was something
She said to her,
Or something she did to her,
Or was it what she did not say,
Or did not do that brought
Anne back to have her baby?

But Mary Hedghes never went about
Begging for Anne's transgression,
Or asking us to send old baby clothes
Or make new work.

Mary Hedghes' fingers
Went deeper than old baby clothes
When she groped in festering entrails
To find the parted ends.

To find the parted ends
And tie them tight—
Tight as fiddle-strings.

And I think this night
Of Anne Williams' man,
Standing in the battle-ditches
With wide eyes over the black night,
With the clutch at his throat,
And the white chill down
Hip and knee and ankle.
And of the other boys
Of her Sunday-school class—
Jack and Rob and Amizi—
Standing there—
Men of New England—

One foot!
One foot!
One foot following the other!

So!
And so!
And just so!

Steady treading
Steady treading

With something tied—
Deep!
Inside of them!
Tight as fiddle-strings!

The topic for the Woman's Club
This week will be,
"The Unmarried Woman—
Her Right to a Child!"

Times have changed around here,
But not that much—
No, not that much.

Brandon's sent that foreigner
Over here to buy my table,
The one with the bandy legs.
He knows good mahogany
When he sees it.
The trouble with him is
He doesn't know me.

I've heard of this fellow before
With his barn full of old furniture.
They say he has two men
(Foreigners like himself)
Polishing and puttering most of the time
And then carting off to town to sell.

It was just like little Brandon
Thinking he could fool me
With one of his trading tricks.
Folks say that's the way he
Made his money in Wall Street—
Slick tricks!

One day he came riding by
On his circus horse—pure Arabian

The paper says it is, and it looks
Like an animal in a fairy-story—
The one the prince rides—
I never saw one like it outside
Of Mr. Barnum's show at Bridgeport.
He saw my water-bucket standing
On the table and he got off to
Get a drink, or so he said.
I saw him eye it
Standing there a-straddle in his
Riding-breeches and swinging up and
Down on his toes.
He didn't make a fit figure for a horse—
His eyes were too greedy.

I took a look at him and I said:
"It ain't for sale;
I got to have some place
To keep the water-bucket."
I thought that would quiet him,
But here he sends this dark-complexioned peddler
With a catalogue under his arm,
From a Grand Rapids furniture emporium.
It was made in colors
Red and blue and yellow;
Some of it was real pretty.
I could see they were making
Furniture different now,
Just as he said.
And he had a book of coupons

With a fountain-pen ready
For me to sign my name.

He wanted to give me an order
For a brand-new piece of furniture
From the catalogue, and I could
Make my choice within the value.
All he asked was that old clap-trap
Under the water-bucket—that and
My name signed to the paper.

I was slow at first,
Didn't seem to see
Little Brandon standing there
And talking through this critter's tongue.
He was so polite and poor-looking,
I thought maybe I'd let him
Take it along—what there was left of it.
No use holding on to it;
It wasn't worth anything,
And he'd just keep pestering me
Until he carted it away.
But I thought I'd have my say, first;
You know how a woman will sometimes—
And I said: "I know what sent you here
Through this part of Connecticut.
Some one wrote a piece once
And put it in a magazine telling
How this county still had some
Old mahogany that could be had

For little or nothing; picked
Up for a song was the way she said it.
And I said then: 'There, now she's
Done it, now the pestering
Will begin just like it did
Down Greenwich way when they
Had the craze for our old stuff.'
I've been watching you
With your wagon carting
Past here almost every day
With something you picked up,
And I knew it wouldn't be long
Before you came to my door."

And then, I don't know
What it was possessed me.
I said, "That table's been spoken for.
Mr. Brandon stopped last week,
Said he wanted it for that
Million-dollar house they say
He's building up along the ridge—
Said he'd pay real handsome for it, too."

I think it was the way
The foreigner closed his eyes to keep me
From seeing what was going on
That made me suspicious
He wouldn't say it was Brandon
And he wouldn't say it wasn't.
But I sent him off without particulars.

I told him I guessed I'd keep
The table with the bandy legs—
Something had to hold the water-bucket.

I got to thinking after he'd gone
I'd heard my mother say
How she had worked and skimped
For seven years
To buy that table.
For seven years—
Wishing and wishing
And skimping—

Going by on a circus horse—
And wanting, ain't getting!

There's been too much of that going on.
Times have changed around here,
But not that much.
No, not that much.

WAITING FOR THE REAL-ESTATE MAN

Scene—The kitchen of an old Connecticut farm-house. Elderly man and woman sitting before stove.

Time—An early spring day, with the rain on the windows.

The man speaks first.

HE: What I don't understand is
Why he always talks the Sound view
When he brings them up here.
We never set much store by that.

SHE: I always liked to see it
On a summer morning when
We went to get the cows—
Just that blue coming up
The orchard like the ribbon
On a little girl's bonnet.

HE: And them old scrub cedars—
He never misses a chance to
Point them out on the side-hill.
He must know that cedars won't grow
Where anything else can get roothold.

SHE: That's why I always fancied them—
Coming up so friendly and standing
There, winter and summer,
Rain and shine—

HE: Couldn't get rid of them.

SHE: Their little ones
Kept coming on and on
Up the side-hill
Until they almost reached
The back door.

HE: And them fireplaces!
What's all the fuss about them?
We boarded 'em up quick enough
Soon as we could get a stove.
What 're they good for?

SHE: That's where they're smarter.
'Tain't enough just to have
A room het and—

HE: Now don't get to carrying on
With that stuff that has no sense.
You know I don't like it.

SHE: I'm getting so old
I can't tell
What is sense any more.
'Tain't what I thought it was.
I know that.

HE: What's that got to do
With what I'm talking about?

SHE: It's what you said
About fireplaces.

HE: What 'd I say?

SHE: About their being no use.

HE: No, they ain't.

(There is the sound of a motor on the highway. He gets up and in an expectant attitude goes to the window. He pulls the curtain aside to look through the rain. She watches him for a moment in a little flutter of irresolution. Then, with a visible effort, she summons her courage and speaks—at first, falteringly.)

SHE: I—I suppose it 'd fret you
If I come out with it, Will?
B-but I had been a-holding
And a-holding it—
Ever since that first night
We drove up here from the parsonage.
Do you want I should tell you, Will?

HE: What you been keeping from me?

SHE: You recollect it, Will.
How, when we got here
Mrs. Purdy had the fire burning
And the table all set.
I can see just how it looked,
When we come in the door—
The fire in the chimney,
And the doughnuts
In the blue bowl.

HE: She puttered around too late
That night, hanging on, and hanging on—
I always held it against her.

SHE: That's what I'm coming to—
That's what I'm coming to.
When she was through washing the dishes,
It was real late, wasn't it?
And when she was gone, you said:
"I guess I'll turn in first,
And you can come when you get to it."
Do you remember, Will?
And I sat here before the fireplace,
Here I sat, I recollect,
Hearing you pulling at
Your new boots—you had
A fuss with them.
And here I sat.
You know how it is, Will,
When you get to setting
Before a fire seeing what
You're going to do to-morrow.

(She leans toward him—her face in a warm and half-bashful light.)

I couldn't have told you then, Will;
I couldn't have told you then—
But as I sat there,
Just as sure as you are setting here,
I saw a little girl's face—
A little girl's face—

Something like yours
And something like my father's—
Favored his eyes and smiled like him,
And she had his way of
Being honest around the forehead.

HE: If it wasn't a boy
I'm glad it wasn't nothing.
Such talk don't seem fit, anyway—
'Tain't moral to talk it right out.

SHE: It was boarding it up
That killed me, Will.
I never said a word.
Because, then, I didn't
Think it was sense.

But, Will, I knew
When you and George come in
With them planks and begin
To saw and to hammer—
Recollect how I said,
"I guess I'll go over to
Jane Swively's for a spell"?
Did you ever guess why, Will?
Did you ever guess why?

Maybe it was my head then,
Like it is now; but when you
Got to hammering—every time
The hammer struck, something

Got to saying—keeping time—
"They're nailin' her in
So she can't come out!

"They're nailin' her in
So she can't come out!

"So she can't *ever*
Come out no more!

"So she can't ever, ever—"

(She is interrupted by the sound of a second motor in the distance. The man drops the curtain and walks to mirror on side wall to slick up his hair.)

HE: There they are now!
I can hear Merl's old Ford
Turning the hill.
He never will learn to manage it—
Keeps fretting it
Like he did his horse.

SHE: I'll run into
The next room
So they won't see
I been fussing.

(Before she can go voices are heard outside.)

First Voice: Pull the car up 'side the road
Under this old sycamore.

Second Voice: There's a better view
Of the house from here—
Who's got an umbrella?

First Voice: How's it suit you?

Second Voice: Pretty well run down.
How old did you say?

First Voice: Some say a hundred and fifty.

Second Voice: What's the idea
Of those two big pines
Standing there either side the front door?
I'd rip them out first thing.
Too much like a cemetery for me.

First Voice: Yes, city folks seem to feel that way.
You'll find most of them
Dooryard trees cleaned out
Around here nowadays.
Ain't much sentiment in folks any more.

Used to be when a couple
Took up housekeeping

They'd plant two trees
Before the door—
One for each of them—
And then when the kids come on,
Each time, they'd plant
A new one, until they had them
Clean down to the road

SECOND VOICE: Only two of them here!
Somebody get tired?

(Coarse, boisterous laughter and sniggering.)

FIRST VOICE: As the old nigger said,
"Ah reckon de old cow
Don' gone dry!"

(Coarse, boisterous laughter and sniggering.)

(CURTAIN.)

The Burying Ground
Lies on the topmost hill.

It used to be hard
On the farm horses—
Six and seven to the surrey.

But now they take it
A little easier
With their Fords.

I suppose it all
Amounts to the same thing
In the end.

It seems to be
Slowly filling up.

When I was young
And took the back road
Home from school,
We used to stop here
In the spring,
To pick myrtle,
And to play
Hide-and-seek
Behind the stones.

I spy!
And you spy!

And within the shadow
Of every sunken grave
Red lips, and blue eyes,
And scurrying feet,
Quick tears,
And quick forgetting,
And girls' laughter.

But now,
When I go by
I say:

"I wonder why
They never cut the grass?"

George Herrick is a stolid man,
His neighbors say.

He does not sing or laugh
Or listen to the rain.

He lets his sign-board
Do the talking.

It swings both ways
To the road and pinches
With its gray, cracked lips
These cautious words.

Money to lend
On Bond and Mortgage.

I sometimes wonder
Why it is
That almost every man
Who passes by his house
Mumbles with the off-side corner
Of his mouth and strikes out
With his whip.

They say he is not
Human flesh—or fowl.
And they whisper lewd things

Of his mother, telling how
She dropped him early
Like a rotten toad
Upon the road.
I've heard the talk
A hundred times,
And so have you.

And often, when at dusk
On winter nights
I've seen him sitting
At his window
Working his accounts,
I've tried to fancy
How a man must feel
Who cannot see his neighbors
Passing by except he make
A check mark in his book.

But then—
I cannot tell,
I do not know
If this be all the truth
Or even half of what
I should have told.

For when, this evening,
In the rain, I passed his house,
I found him in the dooryard
In his gingham sleeves—

Thin and gaunt and bent—
Hacking at his lilac-bushes
With a broken hatchet.

I stopped to ask him why,
And he said:

"The damned things
Reach out in the wind
And scratch upon my window-pane!"

HAUNTED HOUSES

The haunted house
Upon my road
Is neither
Red nor white.

It has
No shutters
Barred upon a mystery.

No cedar-trees
With shadows
Lying on the night.

But sometimes
When I ride
And all my neighbors'
Lamps are still,

I hear a Voice!

And then I say,
"I guess it must
Have been the wind!"

DOOR-STEPS

A DOOR-STEP
Should be made
To face the West.

So that
When a man
Is through,

He can sit
And watch the sun go down
And say:

"Go along
With you!
My job's done!"

I AM A TINKER

I AM a tinker.
I fix up old things—
Patch and solder and mend,
And putter about folks' back doors
For odds and ends
They have thrown away.

I cannot make new things.
There's something lacking, somewhere.
People say a tinker's nothing
But a fool with a little
Cunning added to his hand.

If I had the head
That was meant to go
With my hands
I might make something new.

But perhaps it's just as well.
God must have known
What He was about,
Because there are
So many folks these days
Who can make new things.

I find them almost everywhere
When I go into a new town
And blow my horn

They all come running out
To see if I have
Something new to sell.

But when they find
That I am just a tinker,
Looking here and there
For old things to mend,
They laugh and curse
And stone me out of town.

They shout:
"He would mend old things!
Fix them up with putty and solder!

"Patch the jug
To hold new wine!

"Splice a crutch
For a cripple that is dead!"

And they spit upon the marks
My feet have left.

And they turn
And hurry back,
Stumbling madly
On each other's heels,
Each to his little shop,
Fearing lest his neighbor

Make his new thing first
And sell it before the paint
And varnish are quite dry.

But I go on
About my way
To patch and mend
And putter about back doors
For odds and ends
That folks have thrown away—
Old junk!
And new junk!
That I take in
Now and then
From the rain—

Stuff that nobody wants
Because they think
It's all worn out
And served its day—
Or else, they are just sick
From seeing it around.

So
I put it away
And keep it.

Some day,
I know,
That in the long swing

Of my circuit,
When I shall come again
Along this road,
These folks will come back to me
With money in their hands
To buy old things.

Then I shall charge them
A round sum, indeed.
Who can tell?
It may be the price
Of immortality.

Perhaps,
After all,
It is only
The old men
Who know
Why God makes tinkers.

PEAS PORRIDGE HOT

You sit there,
And I sit here,
And we shall play
At peas porridge hot.

You on your stool
And I on mine,
And so, between us,
Who knows,
We may find
An answer to this nursery nonsense.

"For some like it hot
And some like it cold,
And some like it in the pot,
Nine days old."

That's about
All there is to it—
A very simple game
When once you learn the tune,
And just how to cross the hands.

But there are men
I find
Who will not play
At such a foolish thing.

They'd rather sit
Upon a stool
All by themselves,
And chew their finger-nails
And make a new game.

I know that they
Get very cross with me
Because I seem
To think that somehow
A good game
Still seems to need

You on your stool
And me on mine.

You sit there
And I sit here.

And so,
Between us,
We shall find:

"That some like it hot
And some like it cold,
And some like it in the pot,
Nine days old."

THE ELEVEN FORTY-FIVE IS LATE

Reyburn took me to the station
But he could not wait to see me off
Because the switchman said
The eleven forty-five was late.

Reyburn could not waste his time
Loafing around a country depot—
It was dead—
There wasn't anything to see.

He didn't mind, so much,
Losing ten minutes,
Now and then,
In city terminals.
You could get some life there—
Sort of stand off
And catch a notion about
Your particular breed of herring.

A man
Calling out the names
Of almost every place
In almost every corner of the land.
There was the thing
To put an edge
On a fellow's imagination.

Red Bank, White Horse, Painted Post,
Ellenville, and Pleasant Valley,
Richmond, Charleston, and New Orleans,
Kansas City, Denver, and the Golden Gate,
All aboard for the Montreal Express!

Italians, Russians, and Chinamen,
Preachers, lawyers, and Congressmen,
Actresses with their aunts,
A dark detective waiting
Behind a post,
A wedding party going through,
A fat man with the gate shut in his face,
A nigger at the soda-fountain
Eating white ice-cream.

"That's the sort of thing
That gives a man a notion
What the world is like."

So Reyburn took to his motor,
And when he had gone
I sat down on a keg of nails
Thinking of herring,
But of no particular breed.

On the siding
Of the one-track road
Stood a shuttle train,
With an idly puffing engine,

Waiting for the eleven forty-five.
And in the open doorway
Of the baggage-car,
A little ox-eyed man
In his dirty shirt-sleeves,
Sitting on a white-pine casket box
Eating a banana—
Peeling it down slowly,
Like the petals of a lily.
Peeling it down slowly,
An ox-eyed man,
Stopping now and then
To swallow with a slow
Side-pulling of his throat.

On the platform,
Shaded by the roof
Of corrugated tin,
A dressed hog
With his four feet
Braced in the air.

A pregnant woman
Weighing a little girl
On a penny slot machine,
A whining child,
Sucking on a purple taffy.

A fussy, important-looking man
Holding his watch in his hand
And shading his eyes down the track.

So we waited.

And the pig lay
With his feet in the air,
And the little girl
Sucked on her purple taffy,
And the important man
Shaded his eyes down the track.

And on us all
The benign countenance
Of the ox-eyed little man
Sitting in his shirt-sleeves
On the white-pine casket box
Peeling a banana
Like the petals of a lily—
Slowly chewing—

THE END

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